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Women Writers 1700-1900

Liminal Letters: Writing Between Spaces in *Emma*

The settings of many of Austen's novels rely on a careful interplay between town and country, public and private, social and intimate. In *Emma*, this dual structure—the essential differences between the inner- and outer-worlds that make up daily life—is the catalyst for movement within the novel. Action centers on the reality that public interactions between people must necessarily include the discussion of private matters, either of the characters present at that moment or of others in the novel. The dynamics of social conversation between two characters rely almost completely on the assumption that there will be a third party, common to the two, of whom they can speak. Through such conversations, the characters place themselves in a liminal position as arbiters of the space between public and private, and in this way, gain control over both the public, social space occupied by those who are speaking, and the private, intimate space occupied by those of whom they speak. The letters written by and to various characters in *Emma* epitomize this liminal space by perpetuating the breaking and stretching of the boundary between the social and the intimate, and by way of this constant manipulation of the public and private, these letters bestow upon both their writer and their recipient a measure of social power and control.

One of the first instances in *Emma* where a letter serves to illuminate the hazy boundary between private and public life is the presentation of Frank Churchill to the new Mrs. Weston via his correspondence with her. The degree of Frank's character clearly relies on the strength of his letter to his new mother, and he is judged accordingly, as readers of the letter remark, "I understand it was a very handsome letter, indeed . . . Mr. Woodhouse saw the letter, and he says he never saw such a handsome letter in his life" (Austen 14). Here the reader gains insight into the function, indeed into the confidentiality, of such a letter: not only was it seen by Mrs. Weston, to whom it was addressed, but also Mr. Woodhouse was privileged, one imagines by way of Mrs. Weston, to read and judge the letter himself. In doing so, both Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Weston form opinions of Frank Churchill based on both the form and substance of the letter, and it is their declarations that Churchill is full of "great good sense" (15) that ultimately influence the way in which other characters, peripheral to the letter, perceive Churchill's moral and social worth. This path of influence has its genesis in a completely private manner in that it comes wholly from Frank's mind and heart, but in the process of setting out words in a letter, this private boundary no longer exists. The letter passes physically out of the private care of Frank Churchill and into the public world of the town post, and in doing so, the content of the letter no longer belongs to even a private correspondence between Churchill and Mrs. Weston. Yet with all which testifies to the public nature of the letter—that so many are privy to its contents, that it becomes the subject of so many conversations—it is undeniably still partially belonging to an intimate space in which the unknown Churchill is attempting to breach the distance between him and his father's new wife.

The power and control embedded in Churchill's letter is realized in an action that also gives the letter its liminal quality: the setting of the private letter, its contents, and its author in a public forum to be discussed and judged. In this case, it is not mentioned but only logically concluded that Mrs. Weston is the person who brings the letter to this social state, and indeed, it is expected of her to do so. In this sense, Mrs. Weston wields great power over her friends and family in her ability to contain and disperse the information in Churchill's letter as she pleases, yet the reader does not see her use the possession of his letters in such a way. Instead, the existence of the letter is grasped by characters such as Mr. Woodhouse, who then use it as a powerful way in which to conclude the nature of Churchill's character. That Mrs. Weston does not hold fast to any of the social power imbued upon her by these letters is a testament to her character as well, and stands her in sharp contrast to the likes of Mrs. Elton, for whom the possession of letters becomes a source of righteousness as she uses them to support her claims of her own social superiority.

Mrs. Elton's style of handling the inherent social power that comes with possessing a letter is markedly different from what the reader understands Mrs. Weston's style to be, yet it still demonstrates the state of the letter as one between private and public thresholds. When Emma enters the Bates' residence late in the novel to make amends with Jane, she finds Mrs. Elton unusually happy, and attributes this to Mrs. Elton's "being in Miss Fairfax's confidence, and fancying herself acquainted with what was still a secret to other people" (343). That Mrs. Elton considers herself the only person privy to the knowledge of Miss Fairfax and Mr. Churchill's secret engagement indicates her understanding that to be the bearer of knowledge over others gives one

undeniable social control, as it places such a person comfortably within both the public realm of conversation as well as in the private realm of quiet confidences. Emma's suspicion that Mrs. Elton's happiness comes from her perceived state of possessing secret information is confirmed by Mrs. Elton's handling of an unnamed letter: "[Emma] saw her with a sort of anxious parade of mystery fold up a letter which she had apparently been reading aloud to Miss Fairfax, and return it into the purple and gold ridicule by her side, saying, with significant nods, 'We can finish this some other time, you know. You and I shall not want opportunities'" (343). Mrs. Elton's more-than-conspicuous handling of the letter is a way of subtly but clearly indicating to Emma that she is privy to intimate knowledge both in regards to the letter-writer and in regards to Miss Fairfax, and Mrs. Elton cements this point by commenting on future moments of closeness between her and Jane. The letter, later revealed as being written by "Mrs. S." is important this time not for its contents but for what it represents. It is a symbol of what Mrs. Elton believes to be the private intimations between her and Miss Fairfax, and this presumed closeness between the two translates into a public, social power over Emma. Through the possession and reading of the letter to Miss Fairfax and the Bates, and her subsequent obvious hiding of the letter from Emma, Mrs. Elton indicates her desire to be in control of the public dissemination of the once private contents of the letter. The intimate collusion between Mrs. Elton and Miss Fairfax suggested by the former's promise to finish the letter at a later time (presumably a time after Emma's departure) is a display of friendship that is meant to manipulate the social dynamics by putting Mrs. Elton at the head of the information hierarchy. At once the reader sees the capacity for the initially private

thoughts of a letter to traverse the bounds of public knowledge, and in doing so, the letter becomes a medium for social manipulation.

In Frank Churchill's explanatory letter to Mrs. Weston near the close of the novel, one sees a third method by which the letter shows its quality and importance as a liminal article. Churchill makes it clear in the substance of his writing that while Mrs. Weston is the sole addressee of the letter, he does not intend her to be the sole recipient of its message. Rather, she is a carefully chosen purveyor of its contents. Churchill reveals the scope of his address when he asks that "you must all endeavor to comprehend the exact nature of my situation" (330); he is reaching out not merely to Mrs. Weston, whose familial ties already secure her forgiveness, but rather to those with whom he knows she will share the letter. When he begs the reader to "see [him], then, under these circumstances, arriving on [his] first visit to Randalls" (330), he begs for the boundary between the privacy of his confession and the publicity of his error to be mended by the sharing of his letter, by the full expression of its liminal capacities. His letter continues to straddle both the social and intimate aspects of his time at Highbury as he asks Mrs. Weston to secure for him "when it is allowable the acquittal and good wishes of that said Emma Woodhouse" (332). At this point one cannot deny that Churchill not only hopes but also *expects* that his intimate conversation, via the letter, with Mrs. Weston will not remain for their knowledge only. Perhaps it is this expectation that causes him to address his letter to Mrs. Weston in the first place: he can be sure, based on her previous handling of letters, that she will be an effective way of disseminating his apologies and explanations. Mrs. Weston is no Mrs. Elton; she does not see the possession of letters to be of such a great social power that she would restrict their contents only to the eyes of

those who suit her scheme of control. Emma, like Mrs. Weston, recognizes the public amelioration that such a letter could make, and for this reason shares it with Mr. Knightley. Here the letter becomes a tool for reconciliation. While each possessor of the letter in turn holds the power of intimate information and confession, much like Mrs. Elton does in her possession of Mrs. Smallridge's letter, such information is now used for the greater good at the price of Mr. Churchill's own private anguish instead of as a tool for separation, as it was in the case between Mrs. Elton and Emma.

The letter is a perfect form, a perfect medium of navigation between the private and social worlds, and because of this, it is indeed a symbol of power and a carrier of a degree of social control. Those who possess information possess power; those who possess intimate information of other people possess the most valuable kind of power in the worlds of Austen's novels because these worlds are based upon social conversation and the connections between people. In the context of the physical spaces in her novel, the letter also appropriately fits. It is the one form of communication that can bridge the opposing settings of country and town, space and confinement, by its mere presence. A letter may be read in one physical, social space, but it brings into that space the intimacy of both the physical and mental state of its author: it brings country into a town flat and the excitement of a town ball into an airy farmhouse. Since social interaction in *Emma* occurs largely because of these letters as they traverse the boundary between private and social, characters bond publicly over an otherwise private or semi-private affair. The letters hold the power of social conversation, the power of social relation, and the power of social information, all while undeniably originating from the most private of sources: the author's mind.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Emma*. London: Zodiac Press, 1950.